Research Approaches

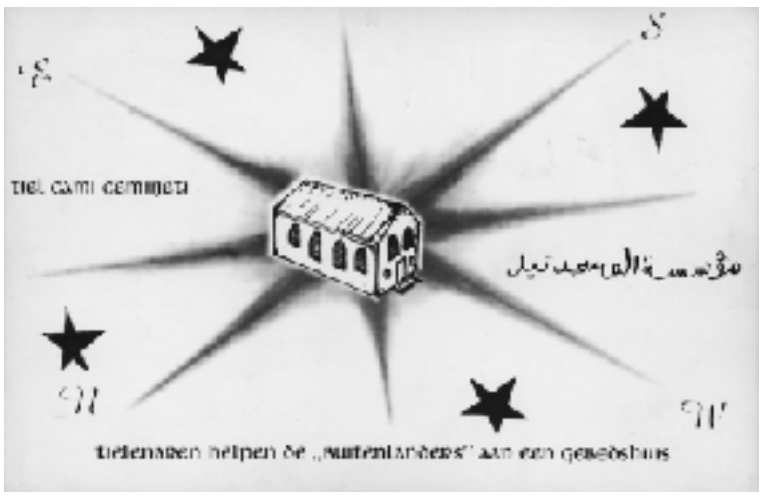
RUUD STRIJP

Researching Moroccan Islam in a Dutch Town

Scholars from various disciplines have examined many aspects of Muslim migrants' lives but it has only been since the end of the 1980s, that the articulation of Islam has been investigated more seriously, leading to the publication of many academic studies. My PhD thesis, 'Around the Mosque – The Religious Lives of Moroccan Immigrants in a Dutch Provincial Town', written in Dutch, constitutes part of this growing academic interest in the religious beliefs and practices of Muslim migrants and their families in the Netherlands.*

The result of an explorative and qualitative research project, this study is based predominantly on anthropological fieldwork conducted in Tiel (the Netherlands) from 1991-1993, and subsequent visits. At the beginning of the 1990s, Tiel had some 33,000 inhabitants, of whom 1,000 were of Moroccan origin. In the summers of 1992 and 1993, I made two field trips to Morocco, specially to the Rif, the mountainous, predominantly Berber-speaking region in North Morocco from where the majority of Moroccan immigrants in Tiel originated.

The main goal of my research was to describe and analyse the ways in which, since their arrival in Tiel, Moroccan immigrants have practised their religion. The construction and maintenance of social, religious, and ethnic boundaries, between Moroccan immigrants and others (especially Turkish migrants and the Dutch), and among Moroccan immigrants themselves, were examined. The problems encountered during fieldwork induced an extensive reflection on the anthropological research conducted among Moroccan and other minority groups in Dutch society. Using the method of participant observation, I discussed both my own investigations and the research of other anthropologists among Moroccan immigrants, so that my dissertation forms part of the recent tendency in anthropology to reflect on the course of anthropological fieldwork, relations with informants, and the production of ethnographic texts.



Card sold to Dutch citizens to raise funds for the construction of the first mosque in Tiel.

My field research was generally tough-going, as full participation was hard to achieve. Relations of trust, which many researchers consider crucial yielding reliable, valid results, were difficult to maintain with Moroccan immigrants. Family life and the religious beliefs and practices of women, for example, were virtally inaccessible to me. Unfortunately having visited the local Moroccan mosque for about half a year, a conflict about my presence meant I was no longer permitted to attend religious services. Therefore I had to seek other opportunities to gather data.

In short, my participant observation was hampered by serious restrictions, which I think also applies to other anthropologists who have conducted research among Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands. They too, have found it difficult conduct intensive participant observation, particularly in the private sphere. Yet I would argue that participant observation offers several advantages. It may uncover what would otherwise remain hidden data. It enables researchers to check their informants' accounts by observing their actual behaviour. Most importantly, the method accesses the local context in which accounts are provided and within which they must be understood.

The crux of this article is the foundation of and activities in the various mosques in Tiel, particularly the Moroccan ones. The establishment and internal organization of the first (Moroccan-Turkish) mosque, founded in 1974-1978 and housed in a former synagogue, and the (exclusively Moroccan) Hassani mosque, founded in 1988 are described. Peculiar to the first mosque is that it contained two prayer-rooms, one for Moroccans and one for the Turkish. Both groups organized their own prayer sessions and appointed their own *imam*s. This situation resembles that in other Dutch towns, where the institutionalization of Islam has likewise occurred along ethnic or national lines. This process was reaffirmed and strengthened in 1988, when the Moroccans moved to another building and founded a new mosque, leaving the other building to the Turkish migrants.

The most important function of this new Moroccan mosque (the Hassani mosque) was religious. It offered a place for the daily obligatory prayers, and for other kinds of assemblies. In the evening, during Ramadan, for instance, approximately one hundred men came to say *tarâwîh* prayers. Gatherings with a more socio-religious character were also held in the Hassani mosque (for the birth of a child or the circumcision of a boy). On such occasions prayers were recited and food served.

Each evening, except during Ramadan, the imam gave an informal religious lesson (dars) to the men present in the mosque. The language spoken was Riffian-Berber or Tamazight, the mother tongue of most Moroccan immigrants in Tiel. The lesson was given after the maghrib prayer followed by a recitation of the Koran. The men then left the prayer hall going to an adjacent room for a chat and a cup of tea. The conversation then assumed a more serious note and the imam started his lesson. He focused on the proper performance of ritual duties and the memorization and accurate pronunciation of Arabic Koranic texts. In this sense, the lesson resembles the way in which religious knowledge has traditionally been transmitted in the Islamic world, in North Africa in particular. The atmosphere during the lesson can generally be characterized as informal, kindly and quite egalitarian. At times, it was even hilarious, which the following may illustrate.

One evening *hajji* Abdelkader, a man in his fifties and a very regular visitor to the mosque, demonstrated two versions of the greeting *as-salam ᶜalaykum* (Peace be upon you), pronounced at the end of the *salat* or obligatory prayer. He asked the other men present whether both versions were correct. The first time he said *as-salam* facing his audience directly. He then turned to the right, while saying *ᶜalaykum*. The second time, he repeated the full frontal face movement as before, while saying *as-salam*; but tilted his head very far backwards, looking to the side while saying *salam ᶜalaykum*. The other men asserted that they considered the second version incorrect, if not absurd. Although it was my impression that *hajji* Abdelkader actually shared their view, he repeated both versions several times. Then, another man demonstrated the same greeting. He pronounced the expression *as-salam ᶜalaykum*, first looking straight ahead, but then turned backwards and looked up into the air, thereby suggesting that this would also be absurd. Finally a third man stood up. Laughingly he demonstrated the example of a person who rises from a kneeling position during prayers. He did this in a very exaggerated fashion, leaning very far backwards and saying *Allah al-hamidah*. Seeing this, nearly all the men, including the imam, burst out laughing. Their hilarity was aroused by the gestures made, and by the expression 'Allah al-hamidah', which was a shortened and therefore incorrect form *of Sami Allahu li-man Hamidah* (May God listen to him who praises Him).

In spite of the open, and informal sphere during the religious lessons in the Hassani mosque, only a small minority of the Moroccan population actually fulfilled their religious duties there regularly. Pertinantly, women were totally absent. The most regular visitors were a small group of fifteen to thirty, mainly illiterate, Riffian men aged forty (or more). Younger men appeared less frequently, and youngsters only occasionally set foot in the mosque. Only at Islamic festivals or during Ramadan did the Hassani mosque attract a larger public. Even then, the number of men who came for the prayers was smaller than research elsewhere in the Netherlands would have led us to believe.

In a (tactful) attempt to examine the social organization of Moroccan immigrants, I also investigated the complications concerning the purchase of the Hassani mosque building from 1988-1993. Before that it had been municipal property. I argue that the mosque constituted a political arena in which the men competed for status. Positions within the Moroccan community had great significance and were worth competing for, epecially because most of the men belonged to the lower social strata and did not hold positions of respect and honour within the wider Dutch context. Apart from contested social status issues between individuals, familial and regional loyalties also influenced the way the conflict over the purchase of the building evolved.

Besides the religious, educational, and socio-political activities in and around the Hassani mosque, I also illustrate the way Islam was practised in Tiel through the analysis of some other events. Despite the existence of legal regulations and facilities for ritual slaughtering, the buying of *halâl* meat and the celebration of the *ᶜId al-kabîr*, or Feast of the Sacrifice, Muslims in the Netherlands are still sometimes confronted by obstacles. In 1991, the slaughterhouse in Tiel was closed on the Sunday that the Moroccan immigrants in the town wished to celebrate this feast. Attempting to persuade the owner to open his slaughterhouse, they organized a demonstration from the Hassani mosque to the municipal hall. This was in vain; and the slaughterhouse remained closed. The incident illustrates of the impact of Dutch society on the way in which Islam in the Netherlands is shaped.

The often-neglected issue of ethnic relations between Moroccan and Turkish immigrants at the local level was brought to the fore by a description and analysis of the construction of a prayer-room in the regional hospital in Tiel. Although the provision of this prayer-room suggests successful cooperation between the groups, in reality, their representatives competed for prestige. This was revealed in their discussions about their respective financial contributions and the furnishing of the prayer-room. In this competition, ritual differences between the Maliki and Hanafi schools of Islamic jurisprudence, were used to differentiate between the two groups. Largely considered of minor significance theologically, these differences were extensively discussed by the delegates. As such, they constituted the 'cultural stuff' enclosed between the boundaries of ethnicity.

The relevance of Moroccan migrants' relations with family members and other countrymen in Morocco drew my attention when I was in Morocco. The relationships between migrants and non-migrants were fairly ambivalent. Migrants longed to pass their holidays in their home countries, but were discouraged because many people, kinsmen and strangers alike, tried to cream off their (usually small) fortunes obtained in Europe. Non-migrants were envious of the relative wealth of Moroccan migrants and very eager to migrate themselves, yet disapproved of many migrants' inclination to display their wealth. Both categories competed for status, thereby demonstrating the great impact of migration on the position of individuals in the social hierarchy of the community of origin. In this respect, my anthropological fieldwork in Morocco emphasized the importance of including research in the migrants' country and it underlined the necessity of taking into account affairs which cross national frontiers and transcend national interests and government policies. ✦

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* *Om de moskee – Het religieuze leven van Marokkaanse migranten in een Nederlandse provinciestad* (Proefschrift Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1998, 304 pp.), Thesis Publishers Amsterdam, 1998 (ISBN 90-5170-456-9).